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O U T L I N E
OF THE
EVIDENCES
OF
REVEALED RELIGION.

O. U. T. L. I. N. E.



EVIDENCES

OF

REVEALED RELIGION.

1801

AN
O U T L I N E
OF THE
EVIDENCES
OF
REVEALED RELIGION:

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL. D, F. R. S, &c.

Quelle etonnante revolution viens je de contempler? Quels
hommes l'ont operée? Quels obstacles ont ils eu a
surmonter. BONNET.

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1805

OUTLINE

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EVIDENCE

OF

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P R E F A C E.

WHEN any controversy becomes very extensive, and of course complicated, branching itself out into many parts, the connection of which with each other is not easily perceived, it is of great use to have a general outline of the whole; shewing the mutual relation of the parts, and their respective importance. This I have here endeavoured to do with regard to the evidences of divine revelation. This, in some measure, resembles the map of the seat of war, by looking on which an intelligent statesman will perceive the real value of any progress that may be made by the armies on each side, and thereby will neither be unreasonably elated with any trifling advantages, nor depressed by inconsiderable losses, but only when he perceives that the enemy is advancing to the heart of his country.

This appears to be now more necessary with respect to the evidences of revelation than to any other controversy. The articles comprehended in them are very numerous, and
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are becoming daily more so ; the objections of unbelievers being of very different kinds, and many of them exceedingly over-rated in the eyes of the objectors. Also many Christians, having been accustomed to lay undue stress on certain articles of their faith, are apt to be alarmed lest the whole should be overturned, when perhaps the advantage that has been gained by the adversary is of real service to their cause, the article that was untenable having been a real incumbrance on the system, and no way connected with it. They are therefore under obligation to unbelievers for objecting to them.

I hope therefore that the following outline of the arguments in favour of divine revelation, in which the proper place, and the relative importance, of each is distinctly stated, will be of some use. The believer will hereby see what is the real amount of any objection that he meets with, and what will be the consequence of admitting the force of it, or how far it really affects the proper evidence of his religion. Also by taking in the whole compass of the argument, it will be more in his power to bring unbelievers from any trifling cavil, on which they are very apt to dwell, to the real merits of the question ; and if they can give him no satisfaction with respect to *these*, every

every thing else he will see to be of little consequence, and hardly worth replying to; though every difficulty is worth discussing among the friends of revelation, as is every difficulty in the system of nature, by those who believe its divine origin.

The difficulties that the believer may safely neglect in a controversy with unbelievers are, inconsistencies in the account of the mere circumstances of historical facts, the authenticity of particular books or parts of books; when enow still remain as evidences of the leading facts; mistakes of the writers in point of reasoning, and every thing besides the evidence of the principal *facts*, which are the *miracles* that are said to have been wrought at the promulgation of the Jewish and Christian religions.

I sincerely wish that intelligent and candid unbelievers (for I doubt not there are such) would give a similar concise and comprehensive view of their objections to revelation. It would contribute to bring the controversy to a fair issue, which is certainly a thing to be wished for by every lover of truth; and no question that was ever proposed for discussion can be of more real importance than this.

This tract contains only the heads of the arguments in favour of the Jewish and Christian

Christian revelations; but they are discussed at large in several of my publications especially the following.

1. Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever
3 Parts.
2. ——— to the Philosophers and Politicians of France on the Subject of Religion.—2 Parts.
3. Discourses relating to the Evidences of Revelation.—3 Vols.
4. A Discourse on the Resurrection of Jesus.
5. Observations on the Increase of Infidelity.

AN O U T L I N E

Of the EVIDENCE of REVEALED RELIGION.

SECTION I.

*Of the Nature of Evidence, as applicable to this
Inquiry.*

EVIDENCE is of different kinds according to the different objects of inquiry. When *quantity*, or *numbers*, are the subject, the evidence of the truth of any propositions is the perception of the perfect coincidence of the two terms of which they consist, as that 2 and 2 make 4, and that the three angles of a right angled triangle are equal to two right angles. And it may be shewn, that the number denoted by the expression 2 and 2, is the very same with 4, and that the sum of the three angles in the triangle is the same with that of the two above mentioned.

The proof of a proposition of this kind is called a *demonstration*, and as the science of mathematics is conversant about numbers and quantity, it is often called *mathematical demonstration*. The contrary of a true proposition of this kind is an absolute *impossibility*, as that 2 and 2 should make 5, or any other number than 4, and such an assertion is said to be a *contradiction*.

Another ground of belief is the constant observation of particular facts, as that of stones, and other bodies, when there is no impediment to their motion, falling to the ground; whence we infer, that though we do not know *why* they do so, it is in consequence of some invariable law of nature, and therefore we conclude that they always will do so. All our faith in the principles of natural philosophy and chemistry is of this kind. But to assert the contrary of propositions of this kind is not called a contradiction, because, antecedent to the observation of the fact, the contrary, for any thing that we could tell, might have been true. Also all general propositions of this kind, however well founded, are subject to limitation from farther and more accurate observations.

Thus it is not true that all bodies, without exception, as at the first we naturally imagine, will fall to the ground, but only such as are heavier than the air of the atmosphere; and in certain circumstances

circumstances even very heavy bodies mount upwards, as pieces of iron placed under a magnet, &c. And till we know the manner in which these events are produced, or the real causes of them, and the mode of their operation, it is impossible for us to say to what farther restrictions such general propositions may be subject. A person who had never seen water in any other form than that of a liquid, would be inclined to say, that it could not appear in any other; though we know by observation, but not from any reasoning *a priori*, that, in a certain degree of cold, it becomes solid, and that in a certain degree of heat, it assumes the form of vapour or steam.

All our faith in history, which relates to things too remote with respect to time or place to be the subject of our own observation, is of this kind; depending upon the knowledge and veracity of those who relate the facts. But we have found by our experience, that in certain circumstances the testimony of others has not deceived us, and therefore we presume that, in the same circumstances it never will deceive us; and therefore that it may be depended upon, even as much as that a stone, if left to itself, will fall to the ground. We have, in fact, no more doubt of the truth of facts of this kind, as that there exists such a city as Rome, or of the past existence of such men as Alexander the Great, and Julius Cæsar, than

we have of that of a stone falling to the ground, or indeed than we have of the truth of the mathematical propositions above mentioned, the difference in the strength of our persuasion in these cases being altogether imperceptible. But to assert the contrary would not be called a contradiction, the thing not being naturally impossible; since all historians, and all travellers, *may* have told a lie, and therefore all that, in strictness of speech, can be said, is, that the non-existence of such a city, and of such persons, is exceedingly *improbable*, considering the nature of the evidence in its favour.

To prove what is a real contradiction, as that 2 and 2 make 5, no evidence whatever can be sufficient. But there is nothing within the bounds of *possibility* that may not be proved by sufficient testimony; that is, the evidence may be so circumstanced, as that the supposition of its being false shall be more improbable than the fact that is supported by it.

In all cases of testimony our backwardness to give our assent arises from a want of analogy in the fact that is asserted to be true, to what we have ourselves found to be so, or that, on any other evidence we believe to be so. Thus, after having seen many stones, and other bodies, constantly fall to the ground, we not only readily believe that other stones, but that all other bodies

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dies which we call *heavy*, as wood, and even feathers, will fall downwards, when not supported by any thing. But having never seen any body whatever rise in the air, except when it was forced upwards for a short time by the power of the wind, we should not immediately believe the account of a man's rising in the air, and ascending above the clouds, by means of a balloon, or in any other method whatever; and our reluctance to believe such a narration will continue till the testimony of those who declare that they have seen it shall be such, as that we shall think it more probable that the fact should be true, than that our informers should either have been deceived themselves, or have intended to deceive us. For on these two circumstances the credibility of all testimony depends.

Believing that all men are constituted alike, that they have all the same senses, as those of seeing, hearing, &c. we can have no doubt but that what is actually seen or heard by other persons, would have been seen or heard by ourselves, if we had been in their place, and therefore their testimony has the same effect as our own observation would have had. Nay, in many cases, a man may have a better opinion of the accuracy of other persons' observation than of his own. He may think their senses more perfect, their attention greater, or their judgment better than his,

and therefore he may believe a fact more firmly on their evidence, than on any observation of his own. In all cases we believe a thing something more firmly for other persons having seen or heard it as well as ourselves. Mankind in general have so much confidence in their parents and ancestors, that, without any examination of their own, or a very superficial one, they receive their faith with respect to every thing from them.

On these principles, however, the king of Siam was not unreasonable in refusing to believe what some Dutch navigators told him, that in their country water was sometimes so hard, as to bear men and carriages. For having never seen or heard of water being in any other state than that of a fluid, he might think it more probable that strangers and travellers should impose upon him, than that such a thing should be true.

This is precisely the difficulty that is to be overcome with respect to the credibility of *miracles*, or such events as are out of the usual course of nature, and which have not been seen by many persons. In this case a man would at first distrust even his own senses, and much more those of other persons, till, upon mature consideration, the testimony should appear to be so circumstanced, that, new and strange as the fact in question was, it should be, on the whole, more probable than the insufficiency of the evidence in its favour.

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The antecedent probability, or improbability, of any events, and consequently the credibility of the testimony respecting them, must be estimated by their analogy, or their want of analogy, to other known events. And the circumstances of things may be such, as that even extraordinary events shall not appear improbable, but be rather expected. In extraordinary situations of human affairs, extraordinary characters are expected to arise, and extraordinary events to take place, without appearing incredible, or exciting any surprise. And such was the state of the world antecedent to revelation, that, if all the circumstances be duly attended to, it will appear far from being unnatural to expect such a divine interposition, which could only be evidenced by miracles, or such a control of the laws of nature as only the author of nature is equal to. These circumstances were the following.

SECTION II.

Revelation not antecedently improbable.

1. **MANKIND** were sunk into the most deplorable state of ignorance and vice, and were in consequence exposed to much misery.

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2. From this, it appeared by the experience of ages, and some of them the most enlightened that there was any reason to expect, that men were not able to rescue themselves.

3. It might, therefore, be expected, that the Divine Being would interpose in their favour. As he is the Maker, and the benevolent Father of mankind, he must have had a motive for attending to the conduct of men; and their happiness or misery could no more be a matter of indifference to him, than the happiness or misery of a child can be to an earthly parent.

4. The Divine Being would naturally chuse this method of instructing mankind, viz. by occasional interpositions, evidenced, as they could only be, by miracles; because it is better calculated to excite *attention* than any constant and uniform appearances, the causes of which men in general do not trouble themselves to inquire into.

5. Moral instruction is communicated in a more intelligible and forcible manner by means of *language*, such as that of prophets commissioned by God for the purpose, than by any exhibition of natural appearances; there being great difficulty in deducing the proof, if not of the Being, yet of the moral attributes of the Deity, such as his benevolence and rectitude, from the works of nature, and the usual course of providence.

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6. It was absolutely impossible that, by the mere light of nature, men should ever have attained to the knowledge of a *future state* of retribution; whereas the most satisfactory evidence of it possible is easily communicated by revelation, and this knowledge was necessary to enforce the practice of virtue, whenever any great sacrifice, especially that of life, was required by it.

7. The laws of virtue come with more authority and effect when they proceed immediately from the mouth of God, or persons especially commissioned by him, than by the medium of the light of nature.

Upon the whole, therefore, though the relation of miracles would be incredible, could we perceive no sufficient *occasion* for them, the incredibility vanishes when it appears that they are calculated to answer so great and valuable a purpose, and when it appears that the Divine Being, who, no doubt, had it in his *power* to work them, had a sufficient *motive*, from his benevolence and good will to men, to work them.

It is farther evident from *fact*, that divine revelation is not naturally, or necessarily, improbable; because it is an objection that was never mentioned by any ancient unbeliever. It is, indeed, intirely modern, and had there been any natural reason for the rejection of divine revelation antecedent to the consideration of the evidences alleged in its favour,

favour, it could not but have occurred to men in all ages, to the ancients, as well as to the moderns.

SECTION III.

The external Evidence of divine Revelation.

THAT the Divine Being, the great author of nature, has actually interposed to give mankind the information of which they stood in so much need, respecting their duty here, and their expectations hereafter, is proved by the testimony of witnesses in all respects the most unexceptionable; the miracles recorded in the Scriptures (a collection of books which contain a history of the intercourse between God and the human race) having the following characters, and they are all that can be required by the most incredulous of mankind.

1. They are sufficiently numerous.
2. They are, on account of their being on a large scale, and other circumstances, free from all suspicion of artifice and imposition.
3. They were performed in the presence of great numbers of persons; whose senses must have been under a supernatural illusion, if they were deceived with respect to them. Consequently,

quently, we have only the choice of a series of most extraordinary and most extensive miracles to answer no purpose but that of *mere deception*, or of others to answer the greatest and most benevolent purpose.

4. They were performed in the presence of enemies, or that of persons the most indisposed to admit the truth of them.

5. Many of them were of long continuance, so as to have afforded sufficient opportunity for the most rigorous examination.

6. Many persons had the strongest motives to examine into the truth of the facts while they were recent; some having been exceedingly offended at the publication of them, and others suffering in consequence of their belief of them, and that for a period of several generations.

7. The accounts of these miracles which we now have were published while the facts were recent.

8. They produced the greatest effect, which proves that they were believed at the time by persons qualified, and interested, to examine them.

9. Their effect was the greatest on the middle and lower classes of men; for such were the apostles, and the generality of the primitive Christians, Jews, and heathens, men who had not the advantage of a liberal education. The vulgar,

gar, of all nations, are only credulous with respect to things that are analogous to their former faith. They are, therefore, in all cases the last to be convinced of any thing contrary to their former opinions. Persons of education, and curiosity, are the most ready to embrace any thing that is quite new. Such persons often take a pride in this; thinking it to be a proof of a superiority over others, and of a freedom from vulgar prejudices. There was, however, among the primitive Christians a considerable proportion of persons of rank and education.

SECTION IV.

The Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus.

ALL the preceding characters of credibility are found in the history of the resurrection of Jesus.

1. His death was ascertained by a public execution, performed by his enemies, whose great object had long been his destruction; and there was no doubt of the fact at the time. Had he not died in consequence of being nailed to the cross and remaining six hours upon it, the wound in his side by the spear must have been mortal. Even if he had not been quite dead, he must have

been incapacitated for walking about, and much more for appearing perfectly well, so soon as the third day.

2. None of the disciples of Jesus had the least expectation of his resurrection ; so that it required the strongest evidence to convince them of it. The testimony of their friends would not satisfy some of them. Nothing less than that of their own senses could do it.

3. After his resurrection he appeared to his disciples many times, in the space of forty days ; at first when none of them had the least expectation of any such event, so that they could not have been imposed upon by a fond imagination ; and afterwards by particular appointment, when they had had leisure to recollect themselves, and consider of any kind of evidence that they should think necessary for their complete satisfaction.

4. None of the appearances were momentary, like that of most supposed apparitions, but of sufficient continuance, to give opportunity for examination, as for handling him, and examining his wounds, which he invited them to do. He also more than once ate and drank with them.

5. At two of these meetings all the apostles, and probably many others (Thomas only being absent at one of them) were present ; and at the appointed meeting in Galilee more than five hundred, some of whom had doubted. And if the

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evidence of five hundred will not satisfy, neither could that of five thousand, or any number whatever.

6. Jesus not appearing to all the people, many would not believe his resurrection, and were exceedingly provoked at the report of it, especially the governors and leading men in the country, while those who were convinced of its truth maintained it at the hazard of their lives. Consequently, there was the strongest motive on both sides to examine into the truth of the fact, while it was recent; and the persecution of Christians, and therefore this motive to scrutinize the fact, continued three hundred years.

7. As the enemies of Jesus had the custody of his body, they ought to have produced it after his supposed resurrection. It was not in the power of his disciples, few and disheartened as they were, to get the body out of the power of the guard that was purposely set to watch it, especially at the time of full moon, when the city of Jerusalem was crowded with strangers, as it always was at the time of passover, so that many of them must have spent the nights in the neighbouring places, as Jesus and his disciples had done. Besides, their merely securing the body could not have availed them. How was it possible for the few who were actors in the business to persuade more than five hundred persons to say

say that they had seen Jesus alive, and to persist in doing so at the hazard of their lives? Had there been any imposition in the case, it was abundantly in the power of the magistrates to have detected it, and it is evident they wanted no motive to exert all their vigilance for that purpose.

8. The persecution of the Christians by the Jews shews that the propagation of Christianity was not favoured by the governing persons of the country; and on this account the fact of the resurrection is more credible at this day than it would have been if it had been so public as to have convinced all the Jews of that age. It would then have been said by unbelievers of the present age, that the whole was a contrivance of the Jewish rulers, that there is no evidence of its having been sufficiently scrutinized at the time, and there are no means of doing it now. Thus in consequence of the evidence not appearing perfectly satisfactory at the time it has become more so at this day.

Such is the *direct*, or *external*, evidence of the truth of divine interposition, or revelation. But besides this, there is another branch of the evidence that is *indirect*, commonly called *internal*, because not depending on the evidence of others, but on facts now existing, and subject to our own examination.

SECTION V.

The internal Evidence of the Jewish and Christian Revelations.

1. **T**HE present state of the world, in the existence of the Jewish and Christian religions, cannot be accounted for without admitting such a state of things previous to it, as, being traced backwards, will require the truth of the miracles recorded in the Scriptures. With respect to the Jews, their present state proves the truth of their preceding history till we go back to their emancipation from their bondage in Egypt, which could not have been effected without the miracles recorded in the books of Moses. Nor could the overthrow of the various systems of heathen religion, which we now see to be overturned, through the whole extent of the ancient Roman empire, and such a prevalence of Christianity as we are witnesses of, have been effected without admitting the truth of ecclesiastical history, and that of the *Acts of the Apostles*, and of the *Gospels* as part of it.

2. The existence of the public rites of the Jewish and Christian religions, the *passover*, and the *Lord's supper*, are standing memorials of the truth of other facts connected with them, and cannot

cannot be satisfactorily accounted for without admitting the divine origin of those religions.

3. The circumstances of the education and characters of Moses, and of Jesus, rendered them incapable of devising the systems of religion of which they were the founders, systems so much superior with respect to the true principles of philosophy, to every thing that we find in the heathen world. Also such men as the apostles, so illiterate, and ignorant of the world, were incapable of carrying on schemes of such complicated and difficult imposture.

4. The evident marks of genuine piety and integrity in the characters of Moses and of Jesus, and also of the writers of the books of the Old and New Testament, make it to the last degree improbable that they should have been *impostors*. And it is equally evident that they were not wild *enthusiasts*, but men in the possession of their right minds, and who acted with uniform consistency in the whole of their conduct.

The character of Jesus, in particular, bears such marks of extraordinary greatness; the authority that he assumed, and the dignity with which he uniformly acted, were such as no person of his low birth and education could have supported without a consciousness of a divine mission. Nor were the evangelists at all capable of feigning of such a character; there being nothing

equal, or approaching, to it in all history. But the perception of this requires a more attentive study of the evangelical history than many persons have given to it, and also a more accurate acquaintance with human nature.

5. Many prophecies, known to have existed many ages, are receiving their accomplishment at present, especially with respect to the state of the Jews, and many more had their accomplishment long after the existence of the books of Scripture in which they are recorded, if there be any truth in history.

SECTION VI.

Various Objections to the Jewish and Christian Revelations considered.

1. **I**T may be said that the books of Scripture which contain the account of the promulgation of the Jewish and Christian religions, may be spurious, and therefore that the history is not intitled to any credit.

Answer. The evidence of the principal facts on which the truth of Christianity depends does not rest on the authenticity of the books of the New Testament, but on the fact of the speedy promulgation

promulgation of Christianity among Jews and Gentiles, which could only be caused by the belief of the miraculous history; and this must be allowed on a variety of other evidence than any that is found in the books, which were not the *cause*, but the *effect* of it, none of the books having been written till Christianity had made a considerable progress. According to the most probable opinion, none of the Gospels were written till about thirty years after the death of Christ; when there were Christians in all parts of the Roman empire.

But there is abundant evidence of the principal of the books of the New Testament having been published while the facts recorded in them were recent, and they could not have been received as they were, by such numbers as were interested in their contents, unless their general truth had been admitted. Consequently, the reception of these books as genuine, and containing a faithful account of facts gives us the concurrent testimony of all those persons, as well as that of the writers of these books.

The high respect which was entertained for the writings of the apostles, and other books of the New Testament while the writers were living, the many copies that must have been taken of them, and their speedy translation into various languages, would effectually prevent any material alteration

tion of these books. Any material corruption of the books would also have been prevented by the various *sects* into which Christians were divided in very early times.

The authenticity of the historical books of the New Testament, as the *Evangelists*, and the *Acts of the Apostles*, which record all the principal facts, was never doubted in early times ; nor was that of the Epistles of Paul, the most active propagator of Christianity among the Gentiles. And it is manifestly impossible that such letters as his are, giving an account of his progress, and of the effects of his preaching, letters abounding with allusions to particular persons, places, and occurrences, and addressed to large bodies of men, who must have known whether the facts alluded to in them were true or not, could have been received as they were, if there had been no truth in them. Paul had also many enemies, who would have been ready enough to take advantage of any falsehoods in his accounts.

There were, no doubt, forged gospels, and forged epistles, in pretty early times ; but not till after the publication of the *Four Gospels* that are commonly received, and after that of the genuine epistles of Paul and others ; so that, being only *imitations*, they rather prove the existence of the originals.

Besides,

Besides, all these spurious gospels contained an account of the leading facts in the Gospel history, such as the miracles, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus, and the speedy propagation of his religion afterwards. For though the Gnostics, the supposed authors of these books, said that Christ had no real body, and was not really crucified, they allowed that he had the appearance of a body, and also that there was the appearance of a crucifixion, so that all the facts that were subject to men's *senses* are the same in both the histories. And though the Gnostics separated themselves from the great body of Christians, so as to be denominated *heretics*, and did not believe the resurrection of the body, they believed a future state of retribution with respect to the soul; so that they held all that was really essential to Christianity, all that could be a motive to a good life. The fact of the existence of those Gnostics so early as the times of the apostles, and who were in opposition to them, and yet called themselves Christians, is most important with respect to the evidence of the truth of Christianity; as on account of their peculiar philosophical tenets, they must have been exceedingly averse to the Christian doctrines, which accorded so ill with their own.

But if all the books that compose the Old and New Testament could be proved to be spurious, the difficulty of accounting for the rise and propagation

tion of the Jewish and Christian religions would not be lessened. Because nothing but the supposition of the truth of facts of a similar nature with those recorded in these books can account for what is well known, on other evidence, concerning the existence and the propagation of those religions.

For the authenticity of the books of the Old Testament, especially those of Moses, which are the principal, we have the uniform testimony of the Jewish nation, the only proper evidence in the case, and also the occasional mention of them by writers of other nations. And a system of religion, so ungrateful as that of Moses was to the great body of the Hebrew nation, from their leaving Egypt to their captivity in Babylon, would never have been conformed to by them, if the authenticity of the books containing the principles of it could have been disputed.

The later in the history of the Hebrews it is supposed that these books were written, the more difficult would the reception of them have been, on account of the increasing addictedness of the nation to other religions. After the reign of Manasseh, who had set up the worship of other gods in the temple itself, when some have supposed that the books ascribed to Moses were first produced, it would have been as easy to have imposed them upon the Tyrians, Egyptians, or Chaldeans,

Chaldeans, for the writings of their respective legislators, as upon the Jews, for the writings of Moses.

Neither was it in the power of Ezra, or of Nehemiah, to have invented the books of the Old Testament after the Babylonish captivity, though they might correct and arrange them as they now are. They had many enemies, who opposed their measures, and especially that very ungrateful one of obliging the Jews to dismiss their wives that were not of Hebrew extraction, as contrary to the laws of Moses; and in this predicament were some of the leading men of the nation. Besides, the Samaritans, who separated from the Jews on their not being allowed to join with them in building the temple, had copies of the books of Moses, and were as zealous for the observance of the same religion, in all its fundamental articles, as the Jews themselves.

The internal evidence of the genuineness of the historical books of Scripture, both of the Old and the New Testament, is of the strongest kind. The very multiplicity of the names of persons, places, and dates, will alone satisfy any intelligent person, that they are no forgeries. No known forgeries were ever written in that manner. And after the time of Moses the accounts that are given of the usual length of men's lives, and of the reigns of kings, correspond exactly with

with the present course of nature, which is far from being the case with the early fabulous histories of the Greeks, Romans, and other ancient nations.

It is also a very strong internal evidence of the genuineness of the books of Scripture, that the faults of the most considerable persons that are mentioned in them are recorded, as well as their virtues.

Obj. 2. It is said, that if the facts recorded in the *Evangelists* and the *Acts of the Apostles* had been true, all the Jews, and the Gentiles also, would soon have become converts to Christianity.

Ans. 1. Strong prejudices prevent a due attention being given to facts, and to reasoning from them, if it would lead to conclusions that are disagreeable to men; and both Jews and Gentiles were most strongly prejudiced in favour of opinions and practices to which Christianity was hostile.

2. Both Jews and Gentiles thought that they could account for most of the facts in the Gospel history without supposing any divine interposition in the case. For, without denying the truth of the miracles, they ascribed them to the agency of evil spirits, or to magic; believing that, by the use of certain set forms of words, it was in the power of men to compel the assistance of superior beings to do whatever they wished to accomplish.

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3. The first preachers of the Gospel were Jews, and illiterate; and to such persons as these the learned, especially among the Gentiles, could not be expected to give much attention, whatever they had to propose. Christianity would therefore necessarily be received chiefly by the inquisitive and unprejudiced in the middle classes of men, who are never very numerous, and from them it would require time to become known, and attended to, by the superior classes.

Allowance being made for the operation of these great impediments, the diffusion of Christianity over the whole of the Roman empire in the time of the Apostles, and its growing reception till the empire became Christian, attended with the overthrow of the idolatry that had universally prevailed in it, may be said to have been even rapid. A good idea may be formed of all these circumstances from the letters of Pliny to the emperor Trajan. Though a man of letters, he appears to have known nothing more of the Christians than what he had learned from his examination of some of them, who had been brought before him as a magistrate; and yet it is evident from what he says, that Christianity had then made an astonishing progress in Bythia, the province of which he was governor.

Obj. 3. It is said that the accounts of the same transactions by different writers, as the au-
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thors of the books of Kings and Chronicles, and the four Evangelists, contradict one another, and therefore that since both cannot be true, perhaps none of them are so.

Ans. All the different accounts of the same transaction in the Scripture history agree with respect to every thing of much consequence, such as all writers would equally attend to, and they differ only with respect to such things as the most credible historians of the same transactions of other kinds are always found to differ in, viz. things of less consequence, and which therefore do not engage equal attention. These differences, therefore, are in favour of the truth of the general history, with respect to which all the writers agree; and this is all that the evidence of the Jewish and Christian religions requires. They prove that the authors did not write in concert, but that the different histories were written by persons wholly independent of each other, who all wrote from their own knowledge of the facts.

Obj. 4. It is said, that in the Scriptures actions are ascribed to the Divine Being which we cannot believe to be worthy of him, especially his order to extirpate the Canaanites, without excepting even women and children.

Ans. All that we know of God, independently of revelation, is from the observation of the works of nature, the laws of which, and all events

events resulting from them, we must ascribe ultimately to him. Now in the usual course of nature events as contrary to our common notions of justice and benevolence take place very frequently, and without any reason being given for them, or our being able to assign any; whole cities being sometimes overwhelmed by earthquakes, and countries much more extensive than Palestine ravaged by war. How inconsiderable was the destruction of men by Joshua compared to that by Jenghis-can, and other eastern conquerors? Whereas the reason for the extermination of the Canaanites is expressly given. It was on account of their idolatry, and the destructive vices connected with it; and thereby it served as a warning to the Israelites, and the whole world, not to give into such practices. Besides, there can be no doubt, but that the Canaanites would have been spared, if they would have abandoned their idolatry.

Obj. 5. Several opinions which now appear to be ill founded were held by men whom the Scripture represents as inspired. Thus madness is ascribed to the agency of evil spirits, even by Christ himself. And many passages in the Old Testament are applied by the writers of the New in a manner quite foreign to their original and proper import. Also some of the persons said to

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have had divine communications, were not good moral characters.

Ans. 1. It may suit the plan of divine wisdom to employ men for particular purposes, and qualify them for the part they have to act, without giving them any more knowledge, or virtue, than were necessary for it. If, for example, a prophet was sent to cure a man of blindness, it was not at all necessary that he should know the physical cause of that blindness. He might be under a mistake with respect to the *cause*, and yet at his word the Divine Being might remove the *effect*. The same observation will apply to the case of insanity, or any other.

2. With respect to the application of passages of Scripture, no inconvenience of any consequence attended the writers being left to their own judgment with respect to them, and this might be erroneous, too much influenced by the mode of quoting Scripture by their countrymen. No mistakes or false reasoning, which only shew that prophets were *men*, can affect their testimony with respect to facts, of which they were competent judges.

3. If the Divine Being employ the very worst of men, as, in the usual course of his providence, he evidently does, to execute very important commissions, he may have good reasons for employing

ing men of imperfect virtue to execute others. But in general the prophets sent by God for the moral instruction of men were themselves men of the most exemplary moral character, highly deserving of universal imitation, especially Moses and Jesus, the founders of the Jewish and Christian religions, who taught as much by their examples as by their precepts. It is also to be observed, that the faults of distinguished persons mentioned in the Scripture are generally severely censured.

Obj. 6. It is said, that if the Christian religion be true, it would have been promulgated in an earlier period, and have been made known to all mankind.

Ans. 1. Since no other advantage, natural or moral, is universal, why should we expect *this* to be so? Are the benefits of good government, of the sciences, or of the arts, universal? It is agreeable to the general plan of Divine Providence, that some men should be more enlightened than others, and that they should be employed to instruct others. Ignorance, and especially a want of that knowledge which would make men virtuous and happy, is certainly a great evil; but it is not the only evil that actually exists; and we may hereafter see, that every kind of evil, natural, and even moral, has its use, in forming the best system possible, such as will issue in the

the attainment of the greatest portion of good. However, this speculation has no propriety in this particular inquiry. We must content ourselves with knowing what has actually taken place. Of the reasons why they are appointed, or permitted, we are no competent judges.

2. All that has yet taken place since the creation of man is probably only his state of infancy, which may bear but a small proportion to the whole of his existence in this world. Christianity may yet become universal, and be the means of making mankind virtuous and happy for many thousand years to come.

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THE END.

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